

Outside expert views student rentals

By ROY H. LOPATA

GUEST COLUMN

Like the New England fall colors, a new set of freshmen comes each autumn to college towns across America. As they arrive on campus with the excitement and anticipation of living without their parents for the first time, upperclassmen will in turn be moving off campus into long-established neighborhoods with traditional single-family homes, many inhabited by faculty and college staff.

But there is a flip side to this yearly off-campus migration. Every university community reports the same story — older near-campus neighborhoods under siege with loud parties, late-night public drunkenness, broken fences, litter-strewn lawns, blocked driveways and deteriorating homes. As a consequence, the townies — which also include young couples, families, retirees, singles and, yes, even local students — reluctantly call local authorities to plead for relief from sleepless nights and damaged properties. Feelings become bruised on all sides.

I am all too familiar with these rites of spring and fall from my 37 years of experience as planning and development director in Newark, Del. — the home of the University of Delaware — as well as from correspondence with municipal members of the International Town and Gown Association, from Newark's participation in the National League of City's University Communities Caucus and from serving on Newark's Town and Gown Committee with governmental, student, community, landlord and college representatives.

My familiarity with college-town life takes into account years of discussions and meetings — public and private — with local investors in the student housing "industry." Make no mistake about it, building off-campus dormitory-style housing or converting existing single-family homes to student rentals, is an industry. As the host of HGTV's, "Income Property," recently commented, "student housing is a license to print money." As a result, we decided long ago in Newark that while landlords could not always directly control the behavior of their tenants, our community could, within the law, regulate the commercial rental industry to promote responsible landlordship and prevent substandard, often dangerous, student housing conditions.

The most significant change in Newark over the recent decades — as in other college towns — has been the proliferation of off-campus rentals in traditional single-family owner-occupant neighborhoods. My community's response has been essentially two-fold: to encourage the construction of apartments designed primarily as off-campus student housing in locations that would not impact our traditional single-family neighborhoods while at the same time developing regulations that would limit the conversion of owner-occupant type housing to student rentals. In the latter case, we adopted new tenant occupancy restrictions; specified a minimum distance between units labeled "student homes;" developed a rental permit and unit inspection system; required a minimum

number of off-street parking spaces for rental conversions; and upgraded our noise and disorderly premises regulations. These measures taken together worked to stabilize our community, which, in turn, has resulted in rising property values and reasonable rents.

None of these measures has proven to be draconian, but they have proven to be effective. Newark's approach to the off-campus housing dilemma, similar in many ways to those adopted by other college towns across the nation, makes perfect sense in Amherst.

During the past few months, I have worked with the Coalition of Amherst Neighborhoods (CAN) to craft a simple, less stringent rental permitting system that I believe will help stabilize family neighborhoods without negatively impacting law-abiding commercial landlords. The Town of Amherst, through its Safe and Healthy Neighborhoods Working Group, has crafted a slightly more involved permitting system. Both receive my strong endorsement as effective yet relatively non-invasive mechanisms to regulate commercial rentals.

Like Newark once was, Amherst is at a crossroads: It can either preserve its historic neighborhoods or allow them to decline, perhaps irreversibly, into student ghettos. Adopting a rental permit system is an essential component of a planning strategy that can help Amherst thrive as a place where students and townies live successfully — and peacefully — side by side.

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